

Facing the Storms: Living in Difficult Times

“You will never find Jesus so precious as when the world is one vast howling wilderness. Then he is like a rose blooming in the midst of the desolation, a rock rising above the storm.” ~Robert Murray McCheyne

Not one, not two, but all four of his daughters died. It was not due to a pandemic, but rather an accident at sea that had taken these four siblings. Shortly after hearing the devastating news of the deaths of his children, the father, Horatio Spafford, penned these words: “When peace like a river attendeth my way, when sorrows like sea billows roll; whatever my lot, Thou has taught me to say, ‘It is well, it is well with my soul.’”

I suspect that one of the reasons this song has become a beloved hymn in the Church is because we also cling to these poignant words in the midst of difficult times. Let’s face it, our world is presently in the midst of a tsunami comprised of waves of fear, anger, and confusion. Whether we are experiencing shortages of chicken, cupcakes, and Charmin or whether we are determining if we should wear hazmat suits to retrieve mail from our mailboxes, nothing in our world is “well”.

In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus and His disciples face a horrific storm (Mk 4:35-41). In fact, in a parallel account in the Gospel of Matthew, the writer uses the Greek term for “earthquake” to describe the severity of the storm (Matt 8:24). This tempest was clearly atypical even though mid-summer storms on the Sea of Galilee were not uncommon. Even the experienced fishermen in this group of disciples were frightened by the severity of the event. They responded with extreme panic and fear as they faced what seems to be an utterly hopeless situation (i.e., literally the “boat is full” in v. 38). Not only had the disciples failed to recognize Who was with them, the disciples also failed to recall that Jesus had promised they would reach the other side (v. 35).

As aptly noted by one commentator, “Their fear of the storm overwhelmed their commitment to Jesus and their confidence that He did care for them (4:38), a reflection of their lack of faith that God could be at work in Jesus to protect them even during the threat of a raging storm” (Guelich, *Mark*, 1:268). Clearly, their plea for help was one of despair and doubt.

However, what is most shocking in this passage, is not the magnitude of the storm, the disciples’ presumptive questioning of Jesus, or the immediate calming of this raging disturbance. The most curious moment comes in verse 41 when the disciples fail to recognize Jesus’ true identity. Though the disciples had been entrusted with the secrets of the Kingdom, they still lacked faith. They only needed to search the Scriptures to understand Who stood in

their midst. The Old Testament clearly teaches that only God controls the elements and that human beings are defenseless when confronted by the forces of nature (see Job 38:8-11; Pss 65:5-8; 89-8-9; 107:23-32). Sadly, as the sea billows rolled, the disciples failed to recognize “it is well”.

Indeed, the storms of life are inevitable. Christianity is not a refuge from the uncertainties and insecurities of this world. When Jesus said let’s go to the other side, He knew full well they would encounter a storm. Similar to this situation, Jesus seldom, if ever, provides us with an explanation for the upheaval. However, just as these calamities are certain, so is the fact that our Savior is ever-present. He promised never to leave us or forsake us (see Hebrews 13:5).

Secondly, the tempests of life are often distractive. The danger for the disciples was not the storm, but rather their unbelief. Proverbs 3:25-26 warns: “Do not be afraid of sudden panic, or of the storm that strikes the wicked; for the Lord will be your confidence and will keep your foot from being caught.” In the midst of the upheaval we are facing, we must not lose sight of the Lord. We must trust, rather than grow anxious; we must depend upon Him, rather than falling into despair; we must rest in His presence, rather than become sidetracked by our surroundings. We must not allow the chaos of the storm to distract from our view of the Creator of the sea.

Finally, the turmoils of life provide us with opportunities to witness first-hand the power of God. The boat which was used as a pulpit in Mark 4:1 had become an object lesson for the disciples. These men witnessed first-hand the Creator of the universe calm the sea. Note that while Mark highlights that the windstorm was great (v. 37), it was the greatness of the calmness (v. 39) that overwhelmed the disciples with fear (v. 41). The upheavals of life afford us an opportunity to experience the Lord’s presence and His provisions in a fashion that would not have been otherwise. In Psalm 107, a group of sea merchants cry out to the Lord in the midst of a great storm. The psalmist writes, “They cried to the Lord in their trouble and He brought them out of their distress; He made the storm be still . . . Let them thank the Lord for His steadfast love” (107:28-31). We have the unique opportunity to observe our loving Savior work in our present situation in a way we have never encountered Him before.

And so, as the storm rages around us, let us not wring our hands in worry or question the character of our Lord. Rather, let us look to the One who cares for us deeply as the One who calms the many storms of our lives. Then truly, we can join the Saints in singing: “It is well, it is well with my soul.”